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Brittany Sanders

Simon Young is a British historian who has published several books and peer-reviewed articles on topics concerning the supernatural, history, and folklore. In 2022, he added *The Nail in the Skull and Other Victorian Urban Legends* to his extensive publication repertoire. Young's impressively exhaustive methodology for curating this collection of Victorian legends is unlike other books of its kind, which have generally focused on fairytales, ghostly and spectral stories, or, such as in the case of Karl Bell's 2012 book, *The Legend of Spring-Heeled Jack: Victorian Urban Folklore and Popular Cultures,* many alterations of a singular legend or unifying motif. In this book, Young investigates a very particular type of story: "belief narratives . . . stories in which the readers or listeners are *expected to believe* or in which they are expected to *consider belief*" (xxi; emphasis added). In other words, Young limits his survey to the sort of extraordinary tale that allows the audience to ponder the *probability* of its validity rather than immediately dismiss the *impossibility* of it. The resulting collection is rather sensational without crossing over into the realms of science fiction, fantasy, or wholly unbelievable tall tales. The most noteworthy effect Young's book has on our understanding of Victorian folklore is the way he reveals a network of literary culture via the history of transmutable storytelling as he carefully traces the variations of each legend from one version of the story to the next, across publication venues, social classes, British territories, and time periods of the nineteenth century.

Young's brief preface summarizes his meticulous investigation into the British Newspaper Archive and similar libraries, wherein he scanned for urban legends using thematic search terms

like "the very common 'strange story' and 'horrible story' to more recondite phrases: 'stranger than fiction,' . . . 'smoking room stories,' 'something out of Arabian Nights,' . . . and so on" (xiii). Deciding which legends would make it into the collection, Young says, depended on if he "found at least three versions (with at least one published in Britain)" or if "there was a comment that the story type was 'common' in the United Kingdom" (xiv). He excluded many interesting stories based on these criteria, but with the sheer volume of possible stories out there, his necessary scrutiny comes at no real detriment to the book's massive survey and global reach.

While the preface outlines Young's selection methods, the significantly longer introduction provides important definitions as well as key historical contexts. The most pertinent definition is one that addresses the book's title:

> Urban legends are belief legends that touch on extreme or difficult aspects of life: crime, death, illness, sex, the supernatural, and war. They frequently involve troublesome informal social institutions (thinking of the Victorian period, duels or wagers or elopement) and anxieties over new technologies (again for the 1800s, bicycles or railways) and social changes (in Victorian Britain the enfranchisement of the Catholics, say). (xxii)

Prior to the 1950s, "folklore" was understood to be stories about fairies, witchcraft, ghosts, and Paganism; however, by the mid-twentieth century, British and American scholars recognized belief legends as a sort of folklore with their own flair for the fantastic in everyday issues (xxii). There is a lot of useful information in the introduction for folklore scholars and enthusiasts alike thanks to Young's diligent study of the oral and literary means through which these Victorian legends survived and evolved. Countless newspapers circulated these "horrible," "romantic," "shocking," "very strange," and "wonderful" stories (198-201). These narratives spread as rumors,

ballads, poetry, and false reports in print; they were shared in homes and clubs; printed in magazines, chapbooks, and broadsides; directly stolen ("clipped") from competitor publishers, individually reported, or invented entirely (xxvi-xxxvi). Before we read a single tale in this collection, Young clearly illustrates that the complex evolution of stories is more than proportional to the labyrinthine network of literary systems that reproduced them in the first place.

The remainder of *The Nail in the Skull and Other Victorian Urban Legends* presents seventy urban legends and the brief delineations of each one's unique literary mobility and their expression of some Victorian phenomenon, anxiety, or cultural artifact. Young consciously avoids the repetition of too many similar motifs or plots in his selections by varying the assortment of dark and whimsical themes. The sensationalism awaiting the reader is made obvious with such illustrative titles as "Child Pie," "Chloroformed!," "Human Sausages," "Poison Duel," "Sewer Monsters," and "The Suicide Club." These seventy legends express Victorian anxieties over death, robbery and murder, women's sexuality, lucky (and unlucky) coincidences, and the fragility of social classes, to name a few.

All seventy sections of this study (one per legend, not including the preface, introduction, notes, or staggering bibliography) are extremely short—only one to four pages in length, with the exception of two sections that reach five and six pages, respectively. While no two sections are identical in format, Young does adhere to a basic organizational structure for exploring each legend's history. Each section begins with a one- to two-line summary and the earliest attestation or print source of the first version of the legend. In some cases, Young suggests thematic connections with other similar legends in the book. Young first discusses the cultural context or phenomenon the legend emerged in response to. Then, he provides a full version of the tale, analyzes the social response, details the publication history, and records variations in the legend's

adaptations over time. Sometimes, the plot grows much more severe, while other times only a line or two is changed, or a title is added. A total of twenty paintings and illustrations accompany selected legends throughout the work.

Legends about death are in no short supply in this book. Stories like "Buried Alive" take this terrible phenomenon as its central theme. Other buried alive stories include an ironic twist of fate, such as "Jolting the Coffin," wherein a woman on her way to her burial awakens when her coffin bumps into something, or "The Lady and the Ring," wherein a graverobber wakes a woman in her coffin when he tries to steal her ring. In fact, the very thin line that separates life and death characterizes a number of stories about coming back from the dead, as in "The Galvanic Convict," where a deceased convict is electrocuted back to life, or "Paying for His Burial," where a husband who faked his death is discovered sitting upright in his coffin counting the donations given to his wife at the wake. There are numerous legends about ghosts interacting with society, pretending to be a ghost, or discovering the skeletons of accidental deaths—such as a soldier found in a tree in "Hollow Tree Death," murdered adulterers in the wall and under the flooring in "Immured Lovers," a couple who leaves a party early in "The Skeletons That Eloped," and a bride who locks herself in a chest during a wedding-day game of hide-and-seek in "The Mistletoe Bride."

As someone who studies women's issues in the Victorian period, I was particularly drawn to the plethora of tales about women that showcase anxiety over a woman's sexuality. There are tales that suggest adultery, such as "The Wrong Bed" where a newlywed ends up in a stranger's bed, or "The Wrong Trousers" where a husband dresses himself, only to find he is wearing another man's pants. Prostitution—or rather, rescuing a woman from it—is addressed in "Do You Know Her?" and "Harem Prisoner." One prostitute attracts the wrong customer in "I'm Jack the Ripper!" There is even a type of oedipal story about accidental incest, tellingly titled, "She's My Daughter?"

Many stories poke fun at society in this book, too, with stories like "Hands in the Muff," wherein two suitors seated on either side of a woman try to hold her hand inside her (euphemistic) "muff," but only end up holding each other's hand. My favorite part of this story is how sexually charged later iterations of this story became, eventually inspiring the addition of the final line, "the two gentlemen are strangers now" (73).

Many more incredible and entertaining stories in this book comment on Victorian life—an eagle kidnaps a baby, beetles eat the eyes of poor children, murdered men are made into meat pies, a woman swallows a snake, a whale swallows a sailor, the earth swallows a sinner—and Young has done an excellent job of not only informing but also entertaining his readers with his incredible coverage of these urban legends. If this is not enough material for folklorists, one of the more astonishing feats of this book—a testament to Young's archival laboring—is the twenty-seven-page bibliography that includes nearly twelve hundred citations for further exploration. *The Nail in the Skull and Other Victorian Urban Legends* is a great resource for anyone who not only loves a good, *weird* story, but is also curious about how such stories came to be and interested in tracing the mobile afterlives of these remarkable legends.

Work Cited

Bell, Karl. *The Legend of Spring-Heeled Jack: Victorian Urban Folklore and Popular Cultures*. Boydell and Brewer, 2012.

Brittany Sanders is earning her PhD from Texas Christian University, where she serves as a graduate instructor, teaching assistant, and editorial assistant for her department. Her research focuses on the intersections of women and class issues as they pertain to the cult of domesticity, sexuality, and labor.